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## THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY'S LATEST SCHEME WOULD ALL BUT PRIVATIZE PUBLIC LANDS

The Federal Land Freedom Act has nothing to do with freedom, and everything to do with avarice.

JIMMY TOBIAS · SEP 11, 2017

Having failed to turn over control of federal lands to state governments and private interests, anti-conservationists in Congress are at work on their next scheme: partially privatizing the public domain by allowing states to take charge of energy development on vast swaths of land owned by the United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

This agenda was on full display at a Capitol Hill hearing last week when the House Natural Resources Committee convened a forum on the Federal Land Freedom Act of 2017, a bill that has nothing to do with freedom and everything to do with avarice. The bill would allow industry-dominated state governments like Wyoming and Utah and Oklahoma to manage the leasing, permitting, and regulating of oil, gas, and other fossil fuel production on national lands. It would allow states to have near-total dominion over huge accumulations of federally owned mineral resources. And it would effectively exempt oil and gas drillers from the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and other laws meant to protect public resources from pollution and destruction at the hands of commercial enterprise.

For its right-wing proponents, the Federal Land Freedom Act is a solid step toward full disposal of some federal lands. "While Congress should pursue opportunities to reduce the size of the federal estate," writes the Heritage Foundation, a powerful oil-and-gas-backed think tank, "the Federal Lands Freedom Act is a significant step toward better management of America's lands and natural resources."

The oil and gas industry, meanwhile, is thrilled about the prospect of new-found "freedom." ExxonMobil has actively lobbied for the legislation's passage. And at the House of Representatives hearing last week, A.J. Ferate, the vice president of regulatory affairs at the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association, endorsed the bill, saying the Department of the Interior "should rely on state regulatory bodies and interstate regulatory mechanisms as the primary regulatory approach related to federal lands on a going forward basis."

What a boon it would be for Ferate's industry if Oklahoma got to control all of the federal oil and gas resources within its borders. That state, after all, is completely dominated by the fossil fuel interests. Its governor, Mary Fallin, has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars in oil and gas campaign contributions during the course of her political career. She signed a law in 2015 that prevents towns, cities, and counties in her state from banning fracking within their jurisdiction. One of her closest advisors is J. Larry Nichols, the co-founder of Devon Energy and the former chair of the American Petroleum Institute. And, in 2016, Fallin created an "Oilfield Prayer Day" in her state to "thank God for the blessings created by the oil and natural gas industry and to seek His wisdom and ask for protection."

Conservationists worry that, if politicians like Fallin get to determine the future of oil and gas resources on federal lands, then those lands will quickly become the exclusive domain of the extraction industry.

The Federal Land Freedom Act is being sponsored in the House by Diane Black (R- Tennessee), a multi-millionaire congresswoman who rode into office during the 2010 Tea Party wave. Jim Inhofe (R- Oklahoma) is its chief backer in the Senate.

Other vocal supporters of the bill include Representative Paul Gosar (R-Arizona), Representative Pete Sessions (R-Texas), Senator Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), and Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah).

Each and every one of these people has received huge sums of campaign cash from fossil fuel companies and employees during their illustrious political careers. Here's a breakdown, courtesy of the non-partisan Center for Responsive Politics:

- Diane Black: \$186,580 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.
- Jim Inhofe: \$1,824,177 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.
- Paul Gosar: \$54,800 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.
- Pete Sessions: \$1,151,940 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.
- Mike Crapo: \$440,937 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.
- Orrin Hatch: \$843,179 in career oil and gas campaign contributions.

According to the Wilderness Society, a land conservation non-profit, the Federal Land Freedom Act represents just "the latest push in a broader anti-public lands movement that has exploded into prominence in the last few years at the state, congressional, and administrative levels." It is just the latest "land seizure" scheme, as the Center for Western Priorities calls it, to emerge from the muck of Washington, D.C. But what a shameless and telling scheme it is: An extremely powerful industry dominates state governments and hopes to dominate the federal government too. It essentially hires elected officials to do its bidding, and those officials deliver a proposed law that would allow said industry to have its way with millions of acres of land that rightfully belong to all Americans. They deliver a bill that would gut public interest laws and eliminate conservation protections in the name of corporate profits and private gain.

This is corruption—anti-conservation corruption—in its most raw and cynical form, and it has overtaken Congress.